

SANTA CRUZ ISLAND FOUNDATION
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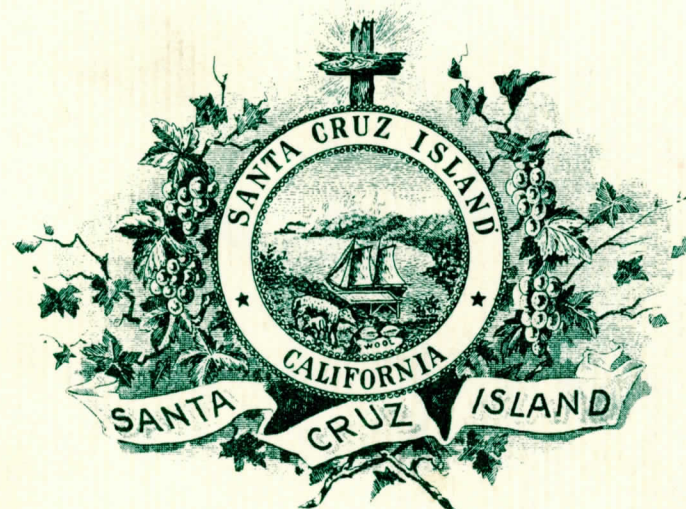
SANTA CRUZ ISLAND ANTHOLOGY



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Edited by Marla Daily



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Barbara and from there trucked to Los Angeles, or shipped directly to the southern city by way of the port of San Pedro. Throughout the years, the wool was shipped the same way as the livestock, for ultimate delivery in Boston or Philadelphia, where its quality was well-known to buyers.

3. On the white facade of Spenger's, the well-known seafood restaurant in Berkeley, CELILO is clearly painted in black—part of the old vessel far from its moorings?

THE LAST VAQUEROS

By Helen Caire

The following article by Helen Caire was first published in The Californians, September/October, 1986. It is the only previously published article included in this anthology which did not first appear in either Noticias or The Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly. It has been included here, however, for the sake of completing this republication of Helen Caire's articles.

Cattle were raised on Santa Cruz Island for over a century. Helen Caire recounts tales of hunting the wild cattle left from the Barron island years (1857-1869). Under the direction of Edwin Stanton, as carried on by his son Carey, for half a century cattle became the mainstay of the Santa Cruz Island Company's island operations (1937-1987). In spring of 1988, following Carey Stanton's death and the passage of the western 9/10ths of Santa Cruz Island to The Nature Conservancy, cattle raising operations came to a close, thus ending a great era in California's history. The ranch in the sea is no more. A small group of persistent white-faced wild-eyed animals escaped the massive exodus, once again forming a small band in the wild.

A woman's intimate recollections revive the unique characters of six horsemen from *el tiempo antiguo*, who once rode in the Santa Cruz Island *corridas*.

These sketches were written at Santa Cruz Island many years ago. I am leaving them mainly in the present tense as I originally wrote them, with a few additions and changes due to the passage of time, for in that passage the first cowboy of the Americas—the vaquero—has disappeared and entered ranching history.

For three generations vaqueros have been riding on the island. Every spring they come for the yearly roundup of sheep,

called from early times *corrida*. Most of them are Barbareños, born in or near Santa Barbara of Mexican-Californian stock, often with a dash of Indian. The best ropers among them come also for the cattle roundups.

But now the number of vaqueros is decreasing. Their sons do not follow the old work; they migrate to cities. They have lost entirely the spirit of the older vaqueros. The young take other paths; the old have very nearly come to the end of theirs. In another generation the vaquero, in California at least, will have become a ghostly rider of a phantom trail. For that reason I am jotting down sketches of a few about whom legend still repeats stories.

Fierce and uncouth, even rather frightening at the end of a roundup season, some of these oldtimers might seem to greenhorns. The vaquero's get-up consists of a blue shirt and jeans, a knife stuck in his belt in a leather sheath, a worn old hat, not a fancy sombrero. He knots a red or blue cotton bandana around his neck. The vaquero's tools are a good horse



One of the author's father's vaqueros, in the Main Ranch barnyard on Santa Cruz Island.
(Helen Caire collection)

and a *reata*, a rawhide lariat coiled and tied near the saddle horn.

The vaqueros arrive on the schooner *Santa Cruz* at Prisoners' Harbor, the Island's main port, about 25 miles due south of Santa Barbara. Most of them step on the wharf clean-shaved or perhaps with a mustache, but as time goes on, many let their whiskers grow. This gives certain ones a wild look, but to a few a rather patriarchal appearance.

El Viejo, José Espinosa

José Espinosa was the kingpin of vaqueros—barring none. I can only remember him when he was called *El Viejo*, The Old One, but those who had seen him in his prime vouched for his outstanding skill and he was still up there with the best in his later years. As a young man José was very handsome, very handsome and crafty—should one say diplomatic?—as old Reynard himself. Teamed with Ulysses, he would have whipped the world. Not a living soul could pull the wool over old José's eyes—black, piercing eyes, hawk eyes that could sight anything in line of vision, seemingly no matter how far.

And José with the *reata*—there was a roper! He was one of the best California has seen. Like all fine ropers, he never threw the lasso till he was sure of his aim. He didn't rope so gracefully as some, but his *reata* went whirring out straight as a die to its mark. I can still see him one day in a large corral working cattle, sitting his horse loosely, watching, watching, smiling with mocking malice at a miss, and cutting in with a neat, straight throw at the calf himself.

José had other talents, besides. He had such a knowledge of medicinal herbs that all the *paisanos* had unquestioned faith in his skill at healing. One summer the sleek little bay mare my sister Didi would be riding had a small saddle sore on her back which even a good rider's saddle would rub open again. Didi was very distressed, for it seemed she would not be able to ride Perla for several weeks. When she told José about it, he nodded knowingly, and with an "I'll fix it," he led the mare away. The next day the sore spot was healed! Didi's eyes opened wide. "José, how did you ever cure it?" "I got up

two—three times last night—” the old vaquero admitted, but a knowing expression and the trace of a smile kept the secret of the cure.

One summer when we were young children, the workmen teased my cousin Justy by telling him fantastic yarns, such as the old one: “Put a horsehair in water for awhile and it’ll turn into a snake.” At that time, Justy happened to have several warts on his hands. One of the vaqueros noticed them and suggested that if he wanted to get rid of them, he should ask José for a cure. So my cousin went to the former *mayordomo* for a remedy. José looked at his hands, and proceeded to give the prescription: “Some night, light a fire. Hold a handful of rock salt in your left hand. Then put the first finger of your right hand in your ear. Drop the salt into the fire and quickly stop up the left ear with the hand that held the salt, before you can hear the fire crackle. Then run as fast as you can for about 50 yards and come back. If the fire is not crackling, your warts will come off; if it is still crackling, they will stay.” I am sure the old vaquero’s lingo was somewhat different. I can only give the directions accurately. Though he was a Barbareño, José spoke English fluently.

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Later, when my sister Jeanne was talking to José, he recalled olden times and highly praised the equestrian skill of two of our aunts who rode the roughest island trails on side saddles. El Viejo shook his head, marveling at their horsemanship, and anyone who knew this excellent rider remembers that he was seldom lavish in praise of anyone, even though he was gallant and courteous in sweeping off his hat and making courtly bows to the ladies. Sometimes he would bring in wild flowers from the hills and present them to my mother and

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(Helen Caire collection. Photo by Harry Sheldon.)

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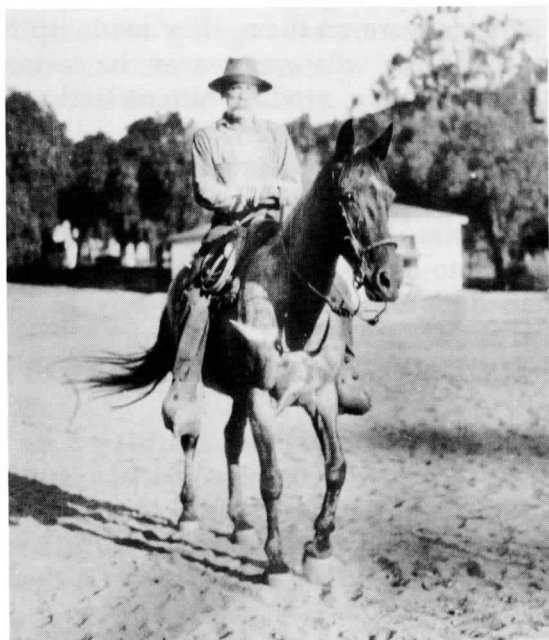
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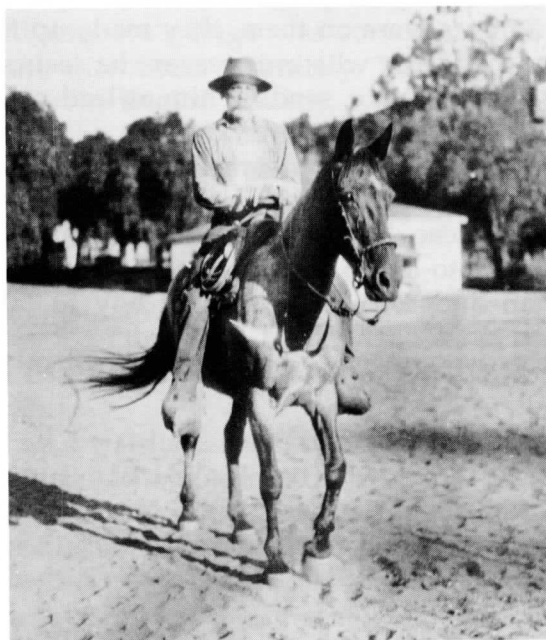
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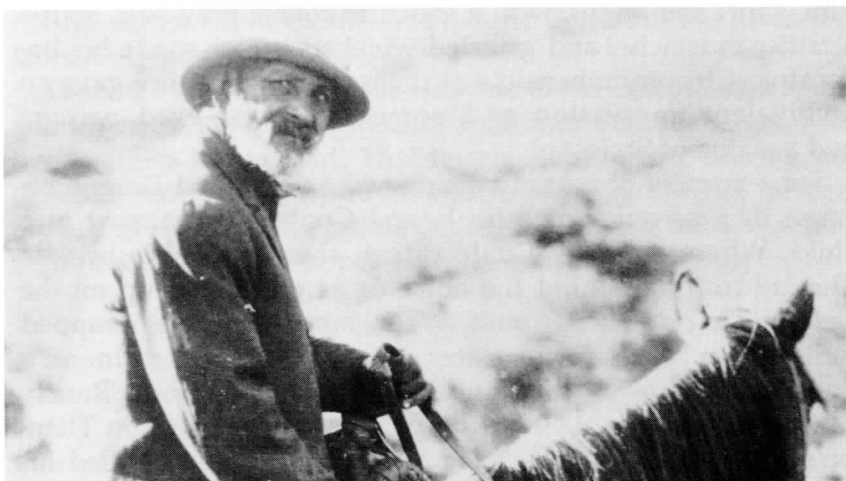
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with a very skillful driver all day on the old Camino del Carro to Christy, for much of the road followed the ridgepole of the Colorados westward.

"They wuz one mule that usta open gates," Cuate began one day in his thin, low voice as we sat around a barbecue fire in the Cañada Laguna. "No madda w'ere they pud 'im, he can always open that gate an' get out. He wuz a good mule, but you never know w'ere you gonna find him."



An unidentified Santa Cruz Island vaquero.
(Helen Caire collection. Photo by Harry Sheldon)

Our driftwood fire, crackling and tangy, was in the creek bed near sally trees, not far from the lagoon which gives the canyon and cove their name, and the fresh water sustained grassy stretches around it. We could not see the sandy beach where wicked breakers foamed, but beyond, we caught blue glimpses where the great Pacific rolls.

"He wuz smart, that mule," Cuate continued. "One time we wuz at Christy brandin' cattle, an' that mule wuz in a corral with a good lock onna gate." Cuate's deepset eyes almost disappeared as the wrinkles increased when he chuckled. He turned his barbecue stick so that the meat might roast on the other side. "Well, we got done an' wuz gettin' ready to go back

to the Main Ranch, but—w'ere's that mule? Preddy soon Don Justinian—your grandfather—he phones from the Main Ranch—The mule's there! He open' that gate that night and walked all a way back, an' he goes inna stable, inna stall an' he's munchin' hay! So your grandfather says, 'Can you manage?' Sure we can. They wuz other pack mules, an' all of us can take blankets onna back of the saddle—That mule—he's smarder en a lodda people." The old vaquero shook his head, laughing softly.



F. Dominguez, Santa Cruz Island vaquero.
(Helen Caire collection. Photo by Harry Sheldon)

One day Cuate was with us on the long ride to Cueva Valdez Cove on the northern coast. When we reached the high mesa overlooking the channel, we dismounted near an enormous round cactus patch.

"I'm gonna show you somethin'." Bearded Cuate was pulling his knife out of its leather sheath as he walked toward the cactus. "These are the best *tunas* on the Island."

Skillfully he cut off and pierced with the point of his knife a very large, light yellow prickly pear. He let it drop, and with the tip of his knife rolled it in the pale gold grass to rub off the tiny spines. Then carefully handling it, he peeled off the thick

outer coating to leave the light green seedy *tuna* ready to eat. Each of us had one; and after our long ride were grateful that the golden, lotus-like blossoms had ripened to this slightly sweet, thirst-quenching fruit. This particular patch, always thereafter referred to as "Cuate's cactus," produces the largest and juiciest fruit of any *Opuntia* cactus on the Island. Other patches of the same variety bear fruit of average size, as do those of the red-flowering *Opuntia* which give red *tunas*.

Cuate's cactus grows in a vast Indian mound. As we started on the trail to the beach of Cueva Valdez to visit again Tres Bocas, our boots were powdered with fine *rancheria* dust, glistening with bits of shell. Long before, the Chumash Indians must have cherished this cactus patch. Did they love the view from the mesa whose base is lapped by the channel waters?

Another time when we were riding along the ridgepole of the Colorados, Cuate reined in. "Wait! I'm gonna show you somethin'." We all stopped and Cuate dismounted and walked toward a low rounded bush in the chaparral. He cut off some berries and gave each of us some. When one bit through the prickly skin, the liquid inside was refreshing on a hot summer day. After that, whenever we rode past that bush, we had to have some of Cuate's gooseberries.

Besides being a vaquero, Cuate was also a horse-breaker. His method was "gen'ling" rather than breaking a horse. Once he did this too thoroughly. Manzanita was a big sorrel mare. When he had her gen'led, he used to let her plod along at a snail's pace and occasionally crop a tempting bunch of alfalfa or grass wherever she pleased. The result—she grew to be the size of a cow.

Manzanita became sick, so sick, in fact, it was thought that she would die—but not Manzanita. She got well and even larger. Cuate's version of the story was this: "Manzanita, she got sick, yes, ma'am, oh, awful sick. Then something inside busted in her; yes, ma'am, some of her insides busted; an' that's what makes her so fat. An' then she got well. Yes, ma'am, she's never sick no more."

Be that as it may, when he began riding her again, she was so fat she held the saddle badly. He used to call her "Bah-loon." We would meet him coming around a bend in the

road, talking in a soothing, low monotone: "Bah-loon, some day I'm gon' keel you." But he never even made her walk any faster.

One summer Cuate was gentling a bay mare with good gaits; she was quick and light, and Didi very much wanted to ride her. My sister wheedled beguilingly, but my father still shook his head. "When Cuate has finished breaking her, you can ride her." And he cautioned the vaquero that she was not to ride Campana till "you say she is safe." Cuate promised. Didi's pleas, "Cuate, you *know* I can ride her!," brought only an apologetic smile and gentle shaking of his head.

A short time later, a guest riding a horse's length ahead of Didi lost her hat in a gust of wind. Didi spurred her horse and, at a lope, picked up the hat. Cuate, on his way to or from some errand such as checking a waterhole, looking over cattle or the fencing of a pasture, saw her from a distance. His face crinkled up into a smile when he went to my father. "Señor, the Señorita Delfina can ride Campana."

Always gentle-hearted and soft-spoken when sober, Cuate became ugly and took to knives and quarrels when "drink and the devil" had done for him. A strong, firm arm was the only thing that could drag this wisp of a demon off to his bunk. But this was a stranger, not the real Cuate. The scapular he always wore was more than a token evidence of the real faith in his heart. *Vaya con Dios*, Cuate.

Pedro García

Pedro García was a vaquero who rode on the island round-ups for many decades. He plays the guitar with great skill and gusto and, in spite of his gray hair and beard, dances lively Spanish steps. There is a certain verve to him which, even in his old age, makes him hold his back straight with the young.

One evening during the roundup, when a clear full moon was shining over the eucalyptus westward and flooding the Cañada del Medio with a silvery light, the vaqueros were sitting on a bench in front of the adobe bunkhouse after the day's work. Pedro was strumming his guitar and singing long-remembered Spanish ditties with several other voices chim-

ing in pleasantly. In the warm evening the age-old songs carried on the quiet air to the soft twang of the guitar.

At one time García, his son and grandson all rode on the island roundups. But the grandson left the vaquero life as all the present generation has. Only the son still rides, for Garcia is at last too full of years to mount a horse and swing a *reata*. He lives in town and has just married a buxom wife.

Lugo

Then there was Lugo who, because of his unusual skill as a vaquero, was made *mayordomo* one year. When in the mood for a lark on a good horse, "Vamos!" he would shout. "Let's gallop!" and with a laugh he would be off, rolling a cigarette with one hand.

But far from having the domineering temperament of old José, he was a very gentle man. Though excelling in horsemanship and roping, his disposition was not fitted to direct others. Riding through canyons and hillsides of cottonwood, ironwood and oak up to the bare, wind-swept ridgepoles, he issued his orders as *mayordomo*; but the vaqueros openly disregarded them. Then this soft-spoken Lugo, this vaquero of undisputed skill, sitting on his horse between earth and sky, would weep that his orders were disobeyed. Tears in a leader do not bring obedience, so Lugo, who is still named among the great vaqueros, came no more to the island roundups after that, though his son is a steady worker there now.

Guelo

Guelo—Miguel Lugo—must be mentioned, for though he is not a first-rate vaquero he is a reliable worker and an excellent shearer. He is now somewhat over 70 but is uncertain about the exact number of years. He first came to the island at the age of 12, before my grandfather acquired it. It was not unusual for a boy to start work in his early teens, before education was compulsory. However, he told my cousin Justy that he had attended school up to the third grade. He had learned to spell "cat" and "rat." With a twig he laboriously traced the

letters in the smooth ground near the saddle racks between the stable and saddle shop. Then his face, open as a child's, crumpled into puzzled wrinkles. "But which one is *cat*?" he asked.

Guelo used to tell of the old days when wild cattle roamed from the flats of Cueva Valdez westward to the Punta del Oeste. They must have been the last of a herd introduced by the Barron Company before The Santa Cruz Island Company acquired the island. My grandfather exterminated them, replacing them with purebred Shorthorns.

Once Guelo was sitting on the beach in front of the bunkhouse, talking over the old days with a *compadre*. "We used to slaughter the cattle in a cañada west of Cueva Valdez," Guelo was remembering, "and jerk the beef there, then pack it into the Main Ranch. The last wild cow was shot in the time of Leopoldo." The old *paisanos* reckoned time at the island by the superintendent in charge at the period of their recollections. Certain small events took on some importance and were not to be tampered with.

"No," interrupted the other oldtimer, "it was in the time of Moullet."

Guelo's guileless face became earnest. He spoke with some emphasis: "Well, then Moullet must have been a liar because the last one was shot in the time of Leopoldo." There the disagreement ended.

Guelo is not the happy-go-lucky, improvident type of some of his *compadres*. In town every Sunday he attends the little church of Our Lady of Guadalupe. At the end of the roundups a benevolent pilgrim's bearded face looks out from under the battered hat. He is the exceptional type of human being who never loses his childhood innocence.

Francisco Dominguez

Of Francisco Dominguez I write last because he seems to embody the best type of worker among the fast-disappearing California vaqueros. A steady, thorough person, very competent and, therefore, sure of himself without conceit, the *mayordomo* can trust him to do his work well all the time. He is a

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splendid man with the *reata*; the graceful ease of his action in throwing the rope might deceive a greenhorn—he seldom misses his mark.

Silent and dignified, Dominguez is unique. He has none of the loquacity of many of his *compadres*. Once in awhile he tells of the glorious days when there were no fences on the ranges, and when the vaqueros got up in the black of morning to get the wild cattle at waterholes. But usually he goes about his business, hour upon hour, with scarcely an uttered word; yet he does not seem withdrawn nor unfriendly. Does he have long, long thoughts of the past? Does he know he is among the last of the vaqueros in California? In his reserve there is something monumental and ancient.

From author to reader: When I first sketched these six old-timers who rode for decades on our Santa Cruz Island ranch, three were dead, one was too aged to ride and only the last two were still active vaqueros. These were the thinning ranks of the elders who remembered *el tiempo antiguo*—the olden times. Of course, there were many others of these often picturesque and sometimes picaresque individuals still riding that I might have sketched—but enough. Many, many years ago they rode the historic trails. Now who is left to remember?

—HC